

INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON VETERANS, MILITARY AFFAIRS, AND PUBLIC PROTECTION

Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the 2024 Interim

July 30, 2024

Call to Order and Roll Call

The Interim Joint Committee on Veterans, Military Affairs, and Public Protection held its second meeting of the 2024 Interim on July 30, 2024, at 11:00 AM in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Rick Girdler, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Rick Girdler, Co-Chair; Representative Walker Thomas, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg, Gary Boswell, Matthew Deneen, Stephen Meredith, Whitney Westerfield, Gex Williams, and Mike Wilson; Representatives John Blanton, Steve Bratcher, Stephanie Dietz, Myron Dossett, Chris Freeland, Courtney Gilbert, Jim Gooch Jr., Daniel Grossberg, Mark Hart, DJ Johnson, Matthew Koch, Savannah Maddox, Candy Massaroni, Rebecca Raymer, Scott Sharp, Sarah Stalker, Pamela Stevenson, Ashley Tackett Laferty, and Bill Wesley.

Guests: Brigadier General (Ret.) Charles Jones, Executive Director, Kentucky Department of Military Affairs; Eric Gibson, Director, Kentucky Emergency Management; Colonel James B. Richmond, Director of Personnel, Kentucky National Guard; Doug Hargreaves, Urban Search and Rescue Coordinator, Kentucky Emergency Management; Corey Ann Jackson, Legislative Liaison, Department of Military Affairs; Sonya Kirkpatrick, President, Mend the Line; and Billy Phelps, Mayor of Morgantown.

LRC Staff: Jessica Zeh, Mark Mitchell, Logan Schaaf, and Hannah Gray.

Approval of June Minutes

On a motion by Senator Boswell, seconded by Representative Stalker, the June 19, 2024 meeting minutes were approved.

Urban Search and Rescue

Brigadier General (Ret.) Charles Jones, Executive Director of the Kentucky Department of Military Affairs; Eric Gibson, Director of Kentucky Emergency Management; Colonel James B. Richmond, Director of Personnel for the Kentucky National Guard; Doug Hargreaves, Urban Search and Rescue Coordinator for Kentucky Emergency Management; and Corey

Ann Jackson, Legislative Liaison for the Department of Military Affairs, provided an update on the Urban Search & Rescue (USAR) program. Mr. Gibson highlighted notable USAR activities over the last eight months, positions and training within the program, important locations (Bluegrass Station and the Wendell H. Ford Training Center), spending, and goals for the next six months.

Colonel Richmond discussed the National Guard's manpower and equipment contributions to USAR.

Responding to a question from Representative Johnson, General Jones and Mr. Hargreaves provided an overview of the USAR program's communication equipment.

Responding to questions from Representative Blanton, Mr. Hargreaves said that USAR uses the military radio system, which can communicate across the state, but can also switch to local frequencies. USAR will be able to adapt to the communication infrastructure already in place in any area in which they need to operate. General Jones said that the National Guard can set up a communication network across the state using mobile towers.

Responding to a question from Senator Boswell, Mr. Gibson discussed the cost of the USAR program and said that it will add four new full-time positions.

Responding to a question from Representative Bratcher, General Jones and Mr. Gibson addressed USAR's coordination efforts in emergency responses.

Responding to a question from Co-Chair Thomas, Mr. Gibson and Colonel Richmond discussed the USAR and National Guard plans involving potential disasters along the New Madrid Fault Line.

Representative Hart praised the USAR team and noted the importance of rapid deployment and coordination in emergency responses.

Responding to a question from Representative Sharp, General Jones, Colonel Richmond, and Mr. Gibson discussed emergency response readiness for possible disasters along the New Madrid Fault Line. Both Kentucky Emergency Management and the National Guard are ready, but they continue to update and refine their response plans.

Co-Chair Girdler highlighted the insurance industry's preparations for possible disasters along the New Madrid Fault Line.

Mend the Line

Sonya Kirkpatrick, President of Mend the Line, provided an overview of the mission and

activities of the organization, which is a mental health education, awareness, and advocacy organization for first responders. Ms. Kirkpatrick shared statistics on first responder suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), warning signs, and response efforts. She discussed the stigma around seeking help with mental health issues.

Co-Chair Girdler emphasized the prevalence of PTSD, especially among first responders and veterans, and the importance of addressing the issue.

Responding to a question from Co-Chair Girdler, Ms. Kirkpatrick said that the earlier an acute stress disorder is identified and addressed after an incident, the less likely it is to become PTSD.

Representative Stalker praised Mend the Line and said that addressing mental health issues early is key.

Storm Shelter Preparedness

Billy Phelps, Mayor of Morgantown, and Senator Stephen Meredith, Senate District 5, discussed storm shelter preparedness. Mr. Phelps emphasized the growing importance of storm shelters in Western Kentucky, where tornado activity continues to increase. Urban storm shelters, which are larger, serve densely populated areas well but are not suitable for rural areas. Mr. Phelps highlighted various options for rural storm shelter design and funding.

Senator Meredith noted the shifting of Tornado Alley to Western Kentucky and the efforts by neighboring states to address increased tornado activity.

Responding to a question from Representative Freeland, Mr. Phelps discussed emergency response plans for storm shelters.

Responding to a question from Senator Berg, Mr. Phelps said that large, urban storm shelters are necessary and can provide longer term housing for residents whose homes are destroyed, but that this concept does not serve rural areas well.

Responding to comments from Senator Boswell, Senator Meredith said that Alabama created a tax credit for storm shelter construction, but that this may not be suitable for Kentucky, with the reduction and eventual elimination of the personal income tax. Mr. Phelps discussed the benefits of individual storm shelters for sparsely populated areas.

Representative Raymer said that Mr. Phelps is one of her constituents and thanked him for the presentation.

Adjournment

With no further business before the committee, the meeting was adjourned at 12:30 PM.